One Foot in the Present

November 29, 2007

When you focus on the breath in the present moment, you want to take that as your anchor. As long as you’re with the sensation of the breath coming in and going out, at least you’ve got one foot in the present moment. And you want to stay in the present moment. Because it’s a wonderful moment, but it’s an important moment. It’s where the mind is making its choices. Intentions arise here, and the results of your intentions also can be seen arising here. This is where you learn about intention. You learn about the causes of stress and pleasure, pain and ease. Because you can see them happening. So try to keep at least one foot in the present. Now, this doesn’t mean that you totally forget the past or you don’t have any anticipation for the future. If you forgot the past, you’d be like a person who had a prefrontal cortex. You’d be totally lost. What you want to do is be more skillful in how you refer to the past, how you refer to the future, taking the present moment as your vantage point. Right now, there are some things you want to remember and some things you just want to be able to put aside. For instance, you want to remember that you’re here to focus on the breath. You’re here to get the mind to settle down. Don’t forget that. And you’re here because it’s going to have a good impact on the future. Don’t forget that either. What’s important is that you learn how to put aside unnecessary unskillful memories and unskillful anticipations. An unskillful anticipation is that you want to, say, get the first jhana tonight or the second jhana within this weekend. Setting goals like that in meditation is not useful because you’re focused too much on the results you want and not on the causes. If you’re going to set a goal, set the goal to be mindful. Be mindful of this breath, and then this breath, and then this breath, and be fully aware of the whole body, say, for this breath, and the next, and the next, as each breath comes. In other words, focus your anticipation on the causes that are going to get the results, and anticipate that you’re going to make mistakes. If you make up your mind, “I’m going to sit here and it’s just not going to happen. There are going to be no distractions at all. There are going to be no problems at all,” you’re setting yourself up for a fall. Think of how the Buddha taught his son Rahula about mistakes. He didn’t say, “Don’t make mistakes.” He said, “Try not to make mistakes, but if you find that you do make a mistake, admit it. Learn from it. Make up your mind you’re not going to repeat it.” In other words, he taught him how to handle mistakes in a mature way. It’s the same with meditation. You anticipate that there are going to be distractions. You will lose the breath, maybe, in the course of the next hour. So make up your mind now that if you do catch yourself losing the breath, that you’re not going to berate yourself. You’re not going to get upset. Just notice the fact that you’ve moved off the breath and come back to it. Remember, it’s normal. Especially if you’re new to the meditation, the mind still isn’t used to settling down for long periods of time. It feels lost, and so it’s going to try to find other things to entertain itself, to keep moving as it’s always been moving. So when you find that it’s doing that, say, “Okay, stop. Come back.” In other words, when you make a mistake like that, remind yourself that you want to be mature about how you handle the mistake. That’s putting yourself in a much better position. As for skillful and unskillful memories, you’ve heard meditation instructions, and you’ve decided you’re going to apply certain instructions tonight. Keep those in mind. As for other issues from the past, again, the Buddha teaches a wise way of dealing with them. Find yourself suddenly entangled in a past mistake, something you did that embarrasses you or actually harmed somebody. Remember, he said it doesn’t do any good. Sit there and get guilty about it, or try to think about how you could go back and undo that mistake. Remorse and guilt don’t go back and change the fact that you made a mistake. But then you have to ask yourself, are you the sort of person who just can’t make mistakes at all? We all make mistakes. That’s one of the nice things about Buddhism. The person who founded it never pretended to be perfect. He started out imperfect, just like us. So he knows what it’s like to remember past mistakes. The Jataka tales, whether they’re actually memories of the Buddha’s previous lives or not, are filled with mistakes made by the Buddha-to-be. So instead of trying to be a person who’s never made mistakes, remind yourself that we all make mistakes. We’ve all harmed one another in our many lifetimes, and there’s a mature attitude to take toward the mistake. One is to resolve not to repeat it, and the second is to develop thoughts of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or forgiveness. Appreciation and equanimity are directed to the person that you harmed, directed to yourself, and directed to all beings. These attitudes help to ensure that you’re going to be more likely to work from or build out of skillful motivations, skillful intentions, as you act. This way, having the proper attitude toward what comes up in the present moment helps you deal with past and future in a skillful way. Memories of the past appear now. Anticipations of the future appear now. It’s all present. It may refer to another time frame, but what’s actually happening in the present is the arising of the memory, the arising of the anticipation. And by giving yourself a good, solid place to stay with the breath, you’re putting yourself in a position where you can handle these things. It gives you another place to stand. So instead of finding yourself totally immersed in the past, you’ve at least got one foot on the breath. It’s the same with mind states, mental worlds that you can get involved with concerning the future. You don’t have to be totally swallowed up by them. You’ve got one foot on the breath, and that gives you a place to stand and watch these things. It reminds you of whatever identity you had, say, in that past memory. You don’t have to assume that identity now. You can pull yourself out. It’s like giving yourself a separate place to stand. The Buddha talks about bhava, these states of becoming, these little worlds we create in the mind. There’s a very strong sense of location. You actually go into the world, that’s birth, and then you suffer from whatever the limitations of that world might be. So your way of getting out of that location is to give yourself another location, i.e., the breath in the present moment, the sense of the body as you feel it from within. This is called a rupa bhava, or a state of being. The sense of the form of the body helps pull you out of those other worlds. So try to stay in touch with the breath and the feeling of the process of breathing, the breath energy as it flows through all the breath channels in the body. The more fully you present are for that throughout the whole body, the more likely you are to understand the skillful and unskillful ways of dealing with thoughts of past and future. You’re in a better position to deal with them more and more skillfully all the time. So try to develop this sense of inhabiting your body right here, right now, as continually as you can, because this gives you a good place to stand. Without this, you’re awash in your thoughts of the past, awash in the worlds of the future, and it’s easy to drown. This gives you a place where you can come up for air.

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